Chapter 18

Life on the E Ring

Once again I walked up the ramp to the third floor of the Pentagon. When I made that climb just a month before, I had been wearing a visitor's badge but now I had a picture badge with all the right clearance marks on it. Reaching the third floor, I turned almost immediately into Corridor 3 and walked out to the E Ring. I was headed for Room 3E346 where my new boss, Steuart Pittman, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Civil Defense, was to be found.

The room had a large sign above the door: "Assistant Secretary of Defense—Civil Defense." I entered. I found myself in an outer office much like the one I had been in when Adam Yarmolinsky interviewed me. There were two secretaries, one guarding a closed door on the right. A white-haired gentleman was speaking to her. Two people sat on a sofa near the closed door. Behind the secretaries were two offices with windows looking out on South Parking. Glass walls let the outside light reach where I stood. I made myself known to the nearest secretary. Almost immediately, a somewhat beefy, florid-faced man came out of the smaller of the two offices and came to greet me. "Mr. Strope, how good to see you. I'm Bob Holt, Mr. Pittman's Executive Assistant," he said pleasantly. "Come into my office for a moment and then I'll take you in to see the boss. He has been looking forward to meeting you."

Holt's office was smaller than the other office, within which a tall red-haired man was in deep conversation with a shorter fellow. Holt motioned me to a chair next to his wood desk and asked about my trip east. We exchanged pleasantries for a few moments and then he pulled out a large organization chart and began to introduce me to the Office of Civil Defense. He had barely started when a buzzer sounded. "Let's go," he said, "Steuart is available."

Steuart Pittman's office was just as big as that of Adam Yarmolinski; however, his large mahogany desk was nearer the door, to the left between the first two windows. On the corridor side of the room was the largest, most ornate conference table I had ever seen, equipped with over a dozen ornate chairs. Steuart Pittman was a trim dark-haired man in his late 40's or early 50's. He arose from his chair and came around his desk to greet me. "Walmer," he said, "So good to meet you." I took his hand. "Walmer is my given name but my calling name is Jerry," I replied. That led to my tale of how I got to be called Jerry and broke the ice. Soon, Steuart was explaining the huge ornate conference table and matching chairs. "It was a gift to OCDM from the Kellogg family. So, we had it shipped down from Battle Creek to grace the Pentagon. Fortunately, this room is big enough for it." Shortly, the interview was over and we were back in Bob Holt's office where he once more led me through the OCD organization chart. The chart was in pencil and there were quite a few erasures. The OCD organization was evidently still a work in progress.

"Let me show you your office," said Bob. (Bob Holt and his wife, Val, became our good friends over the next several years.) We walked a few doors down the E ring to Room 3E314. There was a small black plaque by the door, saying, OCD Research. We entered an outer office equipped with secretarial desk, filing cabinets, and a settee for visitors waiting to see Dr. Research. There was a real live secretary sitting at the desk. I was introduced but I can recall only her first name, Doris. She said, "Professor Abelson has been trying to reach you." "Already?" I asked. Philip Abelson had contacted me at NRDL to give a talk on civil defense research at an upcoming scientific meeting. She handed me a slip, not one of those While You Were Out slips but one headed Office of the Secretary of Defense. Bob Holt and I proceeded into what would be my office for the decade of the 1960s. Wow! It was a two-window affair with attractive light blue carpet. I don't recall how the furniture was arranged because I soon had it done my way. I had a conference table for staff meetings placed end-on to one of the windows and my desk parallel to it by the other window.

The OCD Leaders

That afternoon there was a staff meeting in Pittman's office where I met many of the key people with whom I would be working. Pittman's deputy was the tall, red-haired man I had noticed in the office next to Bob Holt's. His name was Paul Visher. He was actually the *acting* deputy since his appointment was in process. On the organization chart, a copy of which now served as my desk blotter, Paul Visher was in the top center box directly under Steuart Pittman. Spread across the chart below them were five or six "directorates," including one labeled Research. That was me.

The directorate with the biggest staff was Federal Assistance. Bill Durkee was in charge. Many of his staff were located in some eight regional offices spread around the country, each of which were responsible for working with half a dozen or more States in deploying the new civil defense program. About 600 people were employed in those regional offices. Training and Education, including the Staff College, was also in this directorate.

The directorate with the smallest staff turned out to be the one with the biggest clout, so to speak. It was called Plans and Programs and was headed by Joe Romm, an intense young mathematician and computer whiz.

The directorate whose work was the main subject of the meeting was Technical Operations. The director of Technical Operations was Gerald Gallagher, whom I recognized as the white-haired gentleman who had been talking to the senior secretary when first I arrived. Gerald Gallagher's calling name was "Pat." As near as I could see, he was the only holdover from OCDM, where he was Assistant Administrator for Research and Engineering. Since I was now Research, Technical Operations must have been the engineering part of the organization (and it was.) I realized that I had never met Mr. Gallagher even though I had visited OCDM headquarters in Battle Creek several times during the past year. Apparently, my visits were too inconsequential to warrant his

involvement even though I was a major contractor and had just spent two weeks in a shelter with 100 other people.

Technical Operations had the most challenging task of the new shelter program, in my opinion. The essence of the program was to identify fallout shelter in existing buildings and other suitable facilities such as subway stations, mark them with signs and stock the shelter areas with food and water and other supplies. One couldn't "mark and stock" until the shelter areas were identified. We are talking about inspecting millions of buildings throughout the country. It was worse than that. Identifying the protection against radiation afforded by buildings was a new technology. Local building inspectors couldn't do it until they were taught how. So, the intrepid civil engineers in Technical Operations had produced a shelter survey curriculum practically overnight and were in the process of teaching it to a bunch of architects from all over the country who would then go back home and teach the survey technique to the hundreds of others who would be needed to locate the shelter areas. Talk about a "bootstrap" operation!

The subject of the meeting was fallout protection: what level of fallout protection would qualify a building location to be marked and stocked as a shelter? I found that the current criterion was a PF (protection factor) of at least 100; that is, a place where the amount of radiation received would be less than one percent of what would be received if completely unprotected. Back at NRDL, I had argued that a PF of 100 wasn't good enough because the people in shelter experiencing severe fallout would not be able to come out and deal with the remaining fallout hazard (see Chapter 12.) Fortunately, I kept my mouth shut this first day on the job because I was about to learn what reality had in store for us.

The reality was that there was a lot of PF100 shelter in the downtown areas of big cities but practically none in suburban and outlying areas. Joe Romm knew this because OCDM in its last year of existence had done a "pilot survey" that provided enough data to isolate the problem. We couldn't just do downtowns, especially as they were widely judged to be target areas. Romm's recommendation was that we lower the criterion to PF40, which his data showed would provide suitable shelter for suburbanites. I realized that the proposal would still save lives in most of the predicted fallout area. I wouldn't build shelters with a low PF but it made good sense to use them if nothing better was available. Later, I concluded that the proper course of action was to put the whole population in "best available shelter" and then design a program to improve what was available. That idea became grist for my research effort.

A Near-Death on the E Ring

My date of transfer from NRDL to the Office of the Secretary of Defense was October 15, 1961, but I actually reported on September 18, nearly a month earlier. Beyond the brief introduction to Steuart Pittman on that day, I did not get an audience with the Assistant Secretary for more than a week. Finally, I got an appointment on a Friday afternoon near the end of September. No other person was present except Bob Holt, his executive assistant or chief of staff.

The purpose of the meeting was to review my proposed research program. I still had no staff except for Doris, my temporary secretary. There were, I had been told by Bob Holt, some 20 or 30 people in Battle Creek, Michigan, where the headquarters of the OCDM had been, who were to be transferred to the Pentagon as research staff if they wanted to come. I had not yet been there to interview them. I needed approval of my proposed program in some fashion before I made that trip. I approached the task with a good deal of trepidation.

I had rehearsed in my mind how I would approach the presentation and finally I decided to spend a bit of the limited time available on general needs for research before I showed him all those charts of how I would carve up $14 million to do what I felt needed to be done. It may have worked because he kept alert and asked some sensible questions. Nonetheless, he stunned me when I finished by announcing that he would schedule a staff meeting where I could repeat my excellent presentation to obtain the final approval.

My heart sank. What Steuart Pittman was proposing was the infamous “blackball” system where any director without an interest in the topic at hand could cast a “no” vote and kill the proposal. My glorious research program would be sunk without a trace. This is how the small OCDM research effort had been handled and it had been a laughingstock. I had not expected this outcome but my response was heartfelt and immediate.

“No, Mr. Pittman,” I said, “I want only your understanding and approval. I was not asked to come back to the Pentagon to be second-guessed by people without experience in applied research or real-world contact with fallout or shelter living. I was recruited to be your expert on these matters. If that is not to be the case, let us stop now. I have not yet sold my house or moved my family. I’m quite sure I can get my old job back. So, decide who you are going to trust to do the research job for you.”

Bob Holt sat still and watched Steuart intently. Steuart looked at me steadily for what seemed a long time. Then he smiled and said, “You are right. Go ahead. Your program is approved.”

“Thank You, Mr. Secretary,” I said, then gathered up my papers and left the room.

E-Ring Pomp and Stratification

Over the next few weeks I became aware of the peculiar social order that governed life on the E Ring. For one thing, one could walk entirely around the E Ring on the third floor and learn a lot in the process, but first a bit of context.

The E Ring is the outermost of the five five-sided concentric buildings that make up the Pentagon, the world’s largest office building. Being the outermost, the E Ring was the longest to walk around. All the buildings had five stories above ground. The first digit in

one's room number indicated the level or story. I found that the top floor housed the Air Force. That seemed appropriate. The fourth floor was Navy and Marine Corps territory. The Army held sway on the second floor and the first floor was a mare's nest of restaurants, service facilities and secure areas of the Joint Chiefs of Staff that probably extended far below ground. The third floor was reserved for the Secretary of Defense and his organization.

My office on the E Ring was between the second and third corridors, nearly on the opposite side of the building from the offices of the Secretary, Robert S. McNamara. The corridor walls outside my office door were the standard buff color used throughout the building. As I walked along the E Ring toward the Secretary's office, I entered a section where the walls were adorned with pictures and soon paintings of past Secretaries of Defense. Beyond, the walls became paneled in dark walnut as well. Marine sentries stood at the doors leading to the offices of the Secretary and his two deputies. Signs in walnut above the doors identified the positions of the occupants. These guarded doors were quite far apart, indicating the large dimensions of the offices behind the dark paneled walls.

The first was that of the Director for Defense Research and Engineering (DDRE), occupied by Harold Brown, most recently head of the Lawrence Livermore Laboratory. He replaced Herbert York, who was DDRE during the last few years of the Eisenhower administration. Herbert York had been head of Lawrence Livermore Laboratory before Harold Brown. It seemed that defense research and engineering was reserved for former heads of LLL. I spent quite a bit of time at DDRE because Harold Brown was my "boss" as well as was Steuart Pittman. I had to get my research program approved each year by DDRE.

Beyond DDRE was the domain of Robert Strange McNamara, lately head of Ford Motor Co., which he had turned around and made profitable with the help of his "whiz kids." On the other side of the Secretary's layout was that of his deputy, Roswell Gilpatric. I never had any business in there but Steuart saw Gilpatric regularly. In the Secretary's area, I noted that the corridor leading to the E Ring from the center of the building also was paneled and housed an art gallery of combat art paintings from World War II and the Korean War. Extending into the D Ring were Executive Dining Rooms, formal restaurants with white tablecloths and waiters, that were restricted to appointive persons and members of the Senior Executive Service. I ate there once or twice.

As befitting my exalted status, I was offered membership in the Army-Navy Country Club, located about a mile from the Pentagon. Senior officers of the Armed Services waited for years for the opportunity to join this prestigious club but there was room for me in the category of Distinguished Civilians. I forget now the membership fee and annual dues but I liked the food and joined even though I didn't play golf and didn't even use the Olympic-sized pool. I generally lunched at the Club, often with guests I wanted to impress. There were two places to lunch: a large noisy restaurant where one could see people one had seen on TV news and a members-only hideaway where one could have a discreet discussion with one's guest.

Behind all this pomp lay another characteristic of life on the E ring; namely, stratification. Let me illustrate. Steuart Pittman, my boss, was an Assistant Secretary of Defense, one of eight Assistant Secretaries. His ostensible boss was the Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara. Nonetheless, as near as I could tell, he saw McNamara less than once a month; perhaps four or five times a year. Most of the time he saw the Deputy, Roswell Gilpatric. That happened about once a week. I never met Roswell Gilpatric nor did any of my cohorts to my knowledge. One day my cohorts and I were herded down to the offices of the Secretary of Defense and lined up in a large anteroom where Robert McNamara came down the line shaking hands as Steuart introduced each of us. That is the only time I met Robert McNamara. I was more directly involved with the DDRE, Harold Brown, and met him half a dozen times. Mostly, I worked with his chief of staff.

The Outreach Problem

I have already mentioned that Dr. Phil Abelson, president of the Washington Academy of Sciences, had made contact even before my arrival, trying to arrange for my participation in a late October scientific meeting. Actually, it was a three or four-day "Institute" on nuclear radiation and radioactivity and the students were high school science teachers from the Washington area. Dr. Abelson and his colleague, Dr. Ralph Lapp, thought that if their Institute was successful it might be repeated across the country as a help to our fallout shelter program. There was no objection from Steuart Pittman's office and after the usual schedule adjustments I made a presentation on November 3 to a group of 100 or so. The presentation was 10 percent recapitulation of the nature of the fallout from nuclear explosions, 20 percent on the civil defense program set in motion by President Kennedy and the rest on the nature of the research effort I hoped to set in motion. The latter was in effect a catalog of the subject areas where I believed we lacked sufficient knowledge. The talk was well received and there were a number of thoughtful questions and comments following it.

A speech of this kind is a natural form of outreach to stakeholders and others interested in the program at issue but the outreach problem for civil defense was about to change radically and quickly. Politically, civil defense had been espoused by the liberal left in the Democratic Party, which complained during the 1950s that the Eisenhower Administration was not doing enough. Two of the most vocal critics were Senator Jack Kennedy of Massachusetts and Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota. When Kennedy became president, civil defense became administration policy and the Democrats were in charge. We won (right?) but not everyone was happy, not the least being the Soviet Union. Just about the time I reported for duty on the E Ring, the word apparently went out to the communist party faithful to oppose the Kennedy fallout shelter program. Almost overnight, scientists and others who had either supported us or shown no interest became vocal adversaries.

In mid-December 1961, Steuart sent me to Pittsburgh to give a speech to the Pittsburgh chapter of the Americans for Democratic Action, a support group of the Democratic Party founded, I believe, by Hubert Humphrey. The talk was well received but it was one of the last invited by such a group. In late November, I received a call from Dr. Barry

Commoner, a well-known biologist teaching at Washington University in St. Louis. He was calling on behalf of the American Academy for the Advancement of Science (AAAS,) a prestigious science organization that for years had held its annual meeting during the Christmas holidays when the universities were not in session. This year's annual meeting would be held in Denver and he was organizing a symposium on Problems of Survival. Margaret Mead would be speaking on the problems of survival in primitive societies and others would speak on survival in adverse climatic conditions. They needed someone to speak about problems of survival under nuclear fallout. Would I be that expert? I had planned to go home to Los Altos for Christmas in any event so appearing in Denver the day after Christmas didn't seem too difficult. I agreed to participate.

The symposium was held in the Grand Ballroom of the Hilton Hotel in the afternoon of December 26, 1961, where I met Dr. Commoner, Dr. Mead, and two other speakers. Barry Commoner led off with some introductory remarks that informed me that the symposium was not about survival problems in various circumstances but rather was all about civil defense and nuclear attack! Tom Stonier of Rockefeller Institute showed how a large nuclear weapon detonated in a big city would kill everyone with blast and fire, Dr. Seymour Melman of Columbia University demonstrated how a nuclear attack would destroy the economy and maybe society itself, and Margaret Mead feared for humankind's survival, suggesting the UN should provide blastproof shelters in every country in the world so that a fraction of the world's population would survive to repopulate the globe. My presentation of fallout shelter living and its problems was quite inappropriate to a situation in which the sky was falling.

The fact was that Dr. Barry Commoner had lied to me. The other participants were not necessarily parties to the deception but Commoner had misled me completely. Of course, he has continued this practice, becoming the father of the environmental movement in the process. He is still alive and active, publishing an essay in Harper's in 2002 that one reviewer labelled "preposterous." Margaret Mead continued for several years before her anthropological research was proved to be fake. Stonier and Melman became early stalwarts in the unilateral disarmament movement that demonstrated and rioted in the 1970s and 1980s.

In response to the onslaught of the anti-civil defenders, I started speaking to state civil directors and those in the big cities to give them ammunition to defend themselves. The first of these was in Philadelphia and generated the following letter:

> Dear Secretary Pittman:
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> Mr. Walmer E. Strope was the principal speaker at our Civil Defense Council Meeting, here in Philadelphia, on January 17. He gave a clear, easily understood, and very knowledgeable explanation, to our two hundred members present, of the progress of Civil Defense since the Department of Defense took over its Civil Defense responsibilities.

I would like to thank you for his services and too, compliment you on the smart and vigorous staff you have assembled in such a very short time.

With warm personal regards, I am

Sincerely,

Joseph L. Tinney

I did many of these from then on.

Working on the Budget

Another aspect of the E-Ring culture is the prominence of the budget in the daily work. When I arrived to join OCD I was focused on the monumental task of putting to work the funds available to me for fiscal year (FY) 1962, which had begun the past July 1st. But I was soon caught up in staff meetings called to prepare the budget for FY1963.

In the top levels of government, which means the E Ring in the Pentagon, working on the budget seems a never-ending task. During the first half of the fiscal year, the action is within the executive departments and agencies where proposals for the next year's funding are developed and general guidance comes down from on high (the Secretary's office or the White House.) The second half of the fiscal year the action is in the Congress with hearings before several committees in both House and Senate, ending with a big push to get the spending bills passed before the next fiscal year begins. This push often fails, which causes the Congress to pass a "continuing resolution" that permits the affected department or agency to continue spending at the past year's rate until the spending bill passes and is sent to the President.

In our case, our general guidance was contained in President Kennedy's message to Congress of May 25, 1961, entitled "Urgent National Needs." I quote:

> "Such a program will provide Federal funds for identifying fallout shelter capacity in existing structures. And it will include, where appropriate, incorporation of shelter in Federal buildings, new requirements for shelter in buildings constructed with Federal assistance, and matching grants and other incentives for constructing shelter in state and local and private buildings."
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> "Federal appropriations for civil defense in fiscal 1962 under this program will, in all likelihood, be more than triple the pending budget requests and they will increase sharply in subsequent years. Financial participation will also be required from state and local governments and from private citizens. But no insurance is cost-free. And every American citizen and his community must decide for themselves whether this item of survival insurance justifies the expenditure of effort, time and money. For myself, I am convinced that it does."

The first paragraph of this excerpt tells what he intends the new shelter program to consist of. It is clearly to be a multi-year effort. The first sentence covers what we were doing in fiscal 1962. The second outlines programs to be undertaken in subsequent years. So, for fiscal 1963 we will continue to identify, mark, and stock existing shelter and will start including fallout shelter in new Federal building plans and plan incentives for the inclusion of shelter in state, local and private buildings where we find a need.

In the second paragraph, President Kennedy tells the Congress (and us) that the funding of the shelter program will increase sharply over the $207 million appropriated for fiscal 1962. At the time I came aboard in September 1961, everyone I have mentioned was busy working out what that amount should be. I was completely happy with the same amount for the next year as I had for the current year. Nonetheless, I was encouraged to write a justification for as large an increase as I could imagine. This I did but I also arranged to miss most of the seemingly interminable budget meetings scheduled for the rest of the organization. They would have left me too little time to get my research program underway.

Congressional Hearings

Dealings with congressional committees and individual members of the Congress also were an important part of the ethos of the E Ring. Some of the people having offices on the E Ring had no other function but dealing with Capitol Hill. However, most congressional hearings involved preparations and participation by nearly everyone, not only those living on the E Ring but also their supporting staffs elsewhere in the building. One such hearing occurred just as we in OCD were straining to accomplish the shelter survey and stocking program. The instigator was my good friend Herb Roback and his boss, Congressman Chet Holifield.

President Kennedy announced his shelter program in May 1961. He pushed an emergency appropriation through the Congress in July of that year. The dismantling of OCDM and the transfer of responsibility to the Department of Defense went on while the money was being sought. Chet Holifield called for a hearing on these activities at the earliest possible opportunity; namely August 1961. Those were the hearings that I attended at the request of Holifield. I lived with the committee staff and fed questions to Roback to ask the Pentagon witnesses. After those hearings, I got the call in the night from Adam Yarmolinski. Now I would be a witness before the Holifield subcommittee less than six months later.

Steuart Pittman was contacted by Holifield in January 1962, right after the holidays. Why was Holifield eager to hold hearings again so quickly? Having argued for a civil defense shelter program for more than a decade, I believe Chet felt he was part owner of John Kennedy’s initiative and, further, he didn’t think the fallout shelter program went far enough. Also, 1962 was an election year and he could use the publicity. In any event, he and Steuart agreed on hearings to be held during the week of February 19 to 23.

Steuart Pittman and his deputy had never testified before the Holifield committee or any other committee, I believe. Besides myself, Pat Gallagher probably had, but otherwise the OCD leadership were novices. There were discussions and rehearsals at which I acted as a “murder board.” In early February, Herb Roback provided a schedule and invited those scheduled to testify to submit a prepared statement for the record.

The schedule for the first day of the hearings consisted of testimony from just two individuals, Assistant Secretary Pittman and me, and no one else. I was surprised to see research selected for such emphasis but it became apparent during the hearings that Chairman Holifield and Herb Roback were sending a message to Steuart Pittman that he should rely and could rely on me to give him the best advice. Of course, the message was heard by the rest of the leadership as well.

Steuart Pittman’s prepared statement plus a grueling several-hours-long questioning by the committee occupies over 50 pages of the hearing record. My prepared statement plus responses to questions by committee members and staff occupy another 30 pages. That first day of hearings began about 10:15 in the morning and concluded at a quarter to five in the afternoon. There was a small table with two chairs in the big open space between the audience and the curved wall of desks and high-backed chairs of the committee members. Steuart and I occupied those two chairs. After I read my prepared statement, almost the first question thrown at me was: Hasn’t enough research on civil defense been done already? Why do we need more? In consequence of my reply, the testimony launched into fire effects of nuclear weapons, fire storms, fallout prediction, and on and on. On the whole, both Steuart and I did quite well. But it wasn’t getting my research program under way.